

Ice Climbers Guide to City of Rocks

Believe it or not, ice comes to City of Rocks. When it does, the world class granite face climbing that the City is known for is deserted as folks head for the gym, the ski slopes and the fat cascades that are the norm for most ice climbers. But for ice and mixed with an alpine feel, the City is hard to beat. Thin runnels, smears, 'cicles and shields of melt-freeze ice abound, and there are a number of ice filled cracks to climb too. The approaches are easy walking or skiing along the main City of Rocks road, which has been open well into the Reserve for the past few years. The ice climbing of the City is much more akin to the kind of climbing one finds in the mountains-say Patagonia or the Tetons - than the fat cascades or the overhanging bolt protected "M" climbing that is in vogue these days. This similarity makes the City a great training ground for climbing alpine.

A familiarity with the City of Rocks is assumed with this guide. For more details, see one of the many rock guides available. My favorite of these is Dave Bingham's latest edition.

Conditions: Call Brad at Castle Rocks State Park /City of Rocks (208-824-5914) or (208-824-5910). It is worth the call as the climbs of the City are fickle sickles..... Heavy snow conditions can bury some of the lower angled routes, and too-cold temps can cause the ice to sublime—too hot, too cold, too much snow, not enough snow...all can affect which climbs are best.

Ratings: Attempting to utilize one of the sport specific rating systems on this kind of climbing is just absurd. 5.10M4WI3+V1? Therefore, I've given most climbs a Yosemite decimal system rating range that comes somewhere close to the difficulty.

Rescue: Hey, this is serious biz, no getting hurt. Self rescue is best, but if help is needed, go to Almo and call 911! The Almo Quick Response Unit will come and help and Life Run ambulance from Burley will respond too. If you are "backcountry" a helicopter may be indicated even for non life threatening injuries.

The Routes

Generally from east to west:

Old Stone Ruin: 25 foot vertical sickles, hard mixed routes on either side. Rarely comes in, but fun when it does. Park at the old stone house near the east entrance and follow postholes for ¼ mile nw.

The Dungeon: Up to three nice lines on the south east aspect (opposite side as the rock climbs) the left of these is a beautiful runnel in a trough called Hollow Point 5.8 the middle one is "High Caliber" 5.10(January, 2008)

Elephant Rock: Thin mixed routes sometimes form on the south aspect, the one in the main corner/chimney system is :

- **"Stubby Screw":** 5.10b awkward on the day we did it. If conditions are perfect, there is potential for more.

- **“E-Phemeral”**: 5.10 TR just to the left of Stubby is this sweet line that finishes in a classic trough. Not much available pro makes this a TR. There are more lines to the left.

On the east side of Elephant:

- **“Dish Pan Hands”** : 5.9 to 5.10, 40 feet of bolt protected runnel that usually forms. Seen it as easy as 5.8, and as hard as can be! Lower from a bolt or tackle the dry off-width above.
- **“Columbian Crack”** and **“Wheat Thin”**: summer 5.7/8s turn into winter 5.10C1 hou-haw!

Campsite 33):

- The City’s most consistently forming ice. Boulderling wall 10-15 feet high by 30-50 feet wide. Most times there is a low angle apron of ice above, and longer thin runnels to the right. Best in lean snow years as it gets buried in normal winters.

Site 38/43) Gully:

- The City’s highest concentration of reliable ice. Formed by the drainage off slabs and gullies below and to the south east of Bath Rock parking lot. Up to 15 separate smears, runnels and sickles 35 to 100 feet in length. Two have names, though several are consistent formers.
- Descending 38/43 gully on skiers left one first encounters a black streaked wall that increases in height from about 35 feet to about 60 feet. This first wall sports at least four separate steep routes that form once in awhile. Just past the last and steepest of these the wall turns the corner into a drainage. Heading up into the drainage are a few more little sickles and a fun ramp. Continuing down the main 38/43 gully staying on skiers left is a wild looking flake with a prominent nose-like feature. **“Glass Gully”** (5.8-5.10 70 feet) is behind this flake. The climb consists of an apron, a tiny pillar, and a ramble up the gully. This climb gets easier and easier as the season progresses. Ice stays here till late spring. Descend towards the southish into the drainage mentioned above or go northish up the corridor and do the second pitch of Limber. To the right of Glass Gully (left of Limber) two leads have been done, but they are very rarely in condition.
- **Limber**: 100’ 5.7-5.10 runnels. Just past Glass Gully there is a tall limber pine, this route is behind it. Classic City of rocks ice runnels, with occasional pro in the rock...pins may be useful, and it is occasionally thick enough for short screws. One must descend into a hidden little (trough, moat, basin,) at the top.
- Staying next to the rock past the base of Limber, turn a corner by a tiny arch/window, then head up to the **“Link”** 25 feet of easy ice (5.7) that leads into a bushy gully. Most times a harder variations form on the left.
- Above the Moat at the top of the preceding routes, a second pitch usually forms, consisting of a 40 foot apron leading to a short pillar/headwall. A short walk North West from the top is campsite 43.

Bath Rock: One of the most consistently forming runnels in the Reserve is the start of the **“Cowboy Route”** on the North East side, right by the “Bath Rock” sign. Usually there is a somewhat thinner variation to the right. Both are about 40 to 45 foot low angle runnels. The

complete “Cowboy Route” is always an option (as are its variations) but going up one of the twin runnels and down the other is the usual ice line. Often there is a bouldery little runnel coming out of the crack to the left of the twins by the tree. The South East face of Bath Rock has consistently forming thin smears that are around 40 to 50 feet long ending on a ledge with an old angle piton. Pretty darn hard mixed routes await the adventurous above the ledge.

Bronc: 25 feet, 5.8 -5.11 Follow the Creek Side Towers trail north from the Bath Rock parking lot until almost at the towers, then break off right, staying right of the drainage. The melt water from the first slabs encountered on the (skiers) right creates a short but steep ice line on the headwall at the bottom. In 2009, a few new climbs were found on the same rock as Bronc just south along the cliff. From Bronc, hike south over a small timbered rise to find the “This and That” wall. There are five distinct lines here: from left to right “This” 80 feet 5.8 a relatively thick line in a right facing corner, and “That” 100 feet 5.8 an ice filled crack leads to a chock stone move and a ledge at about 40 feet, above the ledge is a typical City groove. For both climbs walk off north. The “Others” haven’t been done as of 1/13/2009, but could be good! The view of ‘A Scots Blessing’ is outstanding from Bronc—but don’t be tempted to shortcut straight over to it...the drainage below Bronc is impassable! Better to descend from below “This” via the Stairways trail.

Creek side Towers: The southeast and east aspects of Creek Side Towers host numerous runnels and occasional shield-like smears when conditions are right. Several full pitch routes have been done that begin with ice runnels and progress to mixed snow and rock. Descent is usually accomplished by either down climbing the farthest south runnel or by going north to the low point between the Creek Side Towers and down climbing an easy runnel to the east.

A Scots’ Blessing: 60 feet 5.10-5.11 Named for the colorful language used during its first ascent (no rope-duh). This thing is a rare and very cool sickle/pillar that forms over the City’s biggest cave-like feature. The source of its water is the small basin below the “Lost World”, which is the backside of the “Drilling Fields” formation. Unfortunately, its west exposure leaves it baking in the afternoon sun and it takes a real winter for it to withstand the heat. Luckily A Scots’ Blessing is visible from many places along the main road so one can save the hike if it is looking marginal. Given the need to scope first, the best approach is probably to descend from Bath Rock parking lot via the “Stair Ways” trail. Note that this trail passes right by the “This and That” wall described above. Follow Creek Side Towers trail for several hundred yards then turn down at the “South Fork Circle Creek/Creek side Towers” sign. Descend to the bottom of the drainage, cross the South Fork Creek, and follow the trail upstream. A couple hundred yards past the foot bridge start keeping an eye on the hillside on the east side of the drainage. The ice is somewhat hidden by vegetation and it would be easy to go right by it if one were concentrating on the trail. Once spotted it is a short hike across the creek and up to the ice. Descend from the top by walking around to the south. Good luck! Be careful, a rescue from this location would be long and hard.

Lost World: The big slabs of the City’s home to friction climbing are often iced up. In 2004, a sport climb went in on the right side that follows a very low angle runnel for its first pitch. This is now one of two ice routes in the City that have bolts for pro. 55 feet 5.5/5.7. The rest of the Lost World ice routes are either really easy or really really scary! That being said, the area is well

worth checking out particularly if you are in the area for Scots Blessing or enroute to the Clam Shell. The approach is the same as for Scots Blessing; just do an end run around the right.

Clam Shell: This massive slab can be sub-divided into three distinct areas from south to north.

- **The Upper Left Clam:** area is separated from the main Clam by a prominent gully/corner, and has two named rock climbs- “D.B. Visits Idaho”, and “Lite”. To the left of these routes the wall occasionally ices up, producing wild looking lines that have yet to be climbed. On the far left side, one route has been led that is one of the longest fifth class ice routes in the City; “Mad Man Across the Water” 300 feet 5.10 (could be substantially easier if the ice was in better). Pins useful for belays. The main gully between the upper left and main Clam is a fun mixed route involving some chimney and snowy off-width.
- **Main Clam:** The potential exists for the old “Infinite Route” or a variation of it to form up. If it ever happens, it will be the wildest thing in Idaho! There are a number of similar possibilities to the right, including the rock route “Shell Game”. None of these possibilities have been done yet.
- **Clam Right:** The right “ear” of the main Clam forms consistently (80 feet 5.7-5.8) low angle slab to a steeper move into the gully behind the top of the main Clam. There is a spectacular old tree at the top that is worth the trip. The vast slabs to the right are almost always covered in ice, and can provide acres of easy low angle cruising if not recently buried in snow.
- **Approach** all routes either by extending the Lost World approach or by crossing through the pass between the Buzzard Perch and the Upper Left Clam from Parking Lot Rock area.
- **Descent** from all routes involves using the gully between the Upper Left Clam and Buzzard Perch

Parking Lot Rock Area

- **South east corner of Parking Lot Rock:** “Cougar Face” this rarely climbed rock route’s first pitch forms into a fun and sometimes relatively thick medium angle ice climb (70 feet 5.8) Rap from a tree.
- **East aspect of Window Rock:** “Take No Prisoners” is another rarely climbed rock route take really comes into its own in winter. Definitely Patagonia-esque! (140 feet 5.9/5.10) An ice filled crack leads to a lower angle snowy crack. Descend by scrambling to the north-east end bolted anchor. There is an easier un-named route to the left that usually forms.
- **Buzzard Perch:** The North east aspect of Buzzard Perch hosts a number of low angle thin smears and runnels. The most consistently forming ones are the last on the left. The second to last runnel on the left has a bolt about twenty feet up on the left side. This bolt hides in the snow and ice, but is the only pro before a right angling crack is reached that leads to a small tree at about the 65-75 foot level. The best approach is

to come from Parking Lot Rock parking area and go behind Window Rock then through the notch between the Buzzard Perch and the Clam (north of B-perch). The climbs will be above you on skier's right.

Granite Mountain: The closest thing to Mountain Climbing in City of Rocks. Four pitches of ice and mixed that lead to the high point of the ridge above Stienfells Dome...Granite Mountain. The view from the summit alone is enough to justify climbing this route; the excellent ice is just a bonus.

Approach: Circle Creek Overlook Road is the best approach, even if it is closed by snow down on the main county road. Beyond Circle Creek Overlook follow the road to the second gate (the first gate is at the Overlook) and instead of turning through the gate to the South and the Building Blocks, head north up the hill towards the Geo-Watt and Road Map wall. At a point near the Geo-Watt complex, head up cross country underneath Road Map wall, traversing left (westish) when even with the initial cliff bands of Granite Mountain.

The first pitch is a traverse across ice to a thin 'cicle-step into a thinner runnel, there is a fixed pin partway along the traverse. Take cams from small aliens up to 3 inches. It is about 80 feet if the traverse is maximized, and about 5.9 awkward mixed (mostly ice) with good pro. This pitch is way better than it looks! Belay from tree.

For the second pitch, scramble up the gully/ramp to the left(westish) and come in to the top of the pitch, rap down from a tree about 70 feet and either pull the rope to lead or TR back up. About 70 feet in all starting with a rock scramble to an ice bulge that offers thirty some feet of thick sticks. Although this "pitch" is optional, it is a worthy part of the route as a whole and is recommended.

For pitch three, return to the top of the first pitch, and scramble up a short bit of ice into an open area under the main flow. Belay from a small tree. Granite Mountain Pitch Three is the fattest, sweetest ice in the City. A full pitch (150 feet) including a 15-20 foot headwall on perfect golden ice in the sun is the usual. There is a left side variation to the headwall that is harder. Belay from a thread and a 2.5 to 3 inch cam in the rock above the ice. From this belay, a tiny bit of easy ice leads into the gully-cum-basin that angles up and left into a steep alcove below the summit.

A final-sometimes desperate- pitch of snowy rock leads to the very top. This last pitch can be the crux of the climb, depending on the conditions. Rock pro highly recommended. (5.7-5.10+).

Descent: Rap 1 from summit into gully, Rap 2 down pitch three, Rap 3 down pitch one. Note the second rap is at least 140 feet. Rack from tiny cams up to 3" and a few ice screws.

Heart Breaker Rock: Arguably the best ice climb in the City resides on the NE face. "**Love Lessons**" 75Meters 5.9-5.10. This is the quintessential City of Rocks Iced Up Crack. It is the farthest right of several parallel crack systems that have varying amounts of ice in them, and can be interesting mixed routes. Love Lessons has the most ice. Depending on conditions, the start can be easy or the crux. Take ice screws—(yes the ice is thick enough to place them!) as well as a few really Big Cams. Descend by down climbing slopes to the south. There are chains at the top of Jay Goodwin's 5.12 Bobby Bensman memorial route on the north face plaque of heart breaker that can be easily reached from the ridgeline. Unfortunately, they are a full 75 meters from the base of Love Lessons, so either use a long (70Meter+ rope), simul-climb or seek a lower belay.

On the far left side of this face is "Good Thing" a fun little blue curtain that leads to either a snowy or icy slab.

Approach from Boxtop trail head.